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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000151

SIPDIS

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TAGS: CY PGOV PREL PHUM OSCE TU

SUBJECT: SISLI MAYOR SARIGUL READY TO LAUNCH NEW PARTY IN
PM BID

REF: A. ISTANBUL 118

1B. NICOSIA271

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: Mustafa Sarigul, recently re-elected for a third term as mayor of the Istanbul municipality of Sisli, voiced absolute confidence that he will be the Prime Minister of Turkey following the 2011 elections. Prime Minister Recep Erdogan will not win a third term, according to Sarigul, opening the door for him to lead the nation. Sarigul plans to establish a new party, opting out of battling for the leadership of the Democratic Left Party (DSP). Sarigul claimed he was instrumental in the National Unity Party (UBP) victory in the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)" by providing the party its entire campaign funding. End Summary.

"I am the next Prime Minister"

2. (SBU) Sarigul told us he will establish a new political party soon to launch his bid to oust Prime Minister Erdogan. To stimulate support for this party, he plans 314 rallies in all 81 provinces over the coming year. According to Sarigul, an internal poll found 85 percent of national respondents recognized his name and he would get 40 percent of the national vote if Erdogan were to step down from the prime ministry. Also, he said he has the backing of some of the wealthiest families in Turkey, including Koc, Sahenk, and Ezcaci.

3. (SBU) According to Sarigul, Erdogan's time is over. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is stalled and the party's diminished support in the local elections shows they are on the way out. Former supporters of the AKP are now turning to the even more religiously-conservative Felicity Party (SP), causing Erdogan much anxiety. Generally in Turkey, even the best regimes last only for two elections, he argued. People tire of the ruling party after two terms, preferring a fresh party to rejuvenate the system.

DSP is a "Worn-out" Name

4. (SBU) Although Sarigul is currently a member of the Democratic Left Party (DSP), he has rejected using it as a platform to launch his bid for national office. After being expelled from Republican People's Party (CHP), the largest

opposition party, Sarigul joined DSP out of political expediency during the recently concluded municipal elections (Ref A). Sarigul thinks the DSP name carries such baggage that he would garner only 15-20 percent of the national vote if he ran as a DSP candidate. Despite the opening at the top of party with Chairman Zeki Sezer's resignation this month, Sarigul denied any ambitions to lead DSP. Sarigul said his new party will be a left-wing party, similar to DSP and CHP. According to press reports, Sarigul has already filed the documents needed to create a new party, called Turkey Change Party (TDP). He reportedly will announce the new party on May 19 and launch his campaign in Samsun -- the date and place where in 1919 Ataturk began his campaign to lead Turkey.

¶5. (SBU) As in our previous meeting (Ref A), Sarigul compared himself to President Obama. He also admired the President's recent visit to Turkey, saying it was a huge success for U.S. foreign policy. Sarigul suggested, however, that President Obama should have visited the poorer squatter settlements (gecekondus) in Istanbul and students wearing headscarves should have been invited to the youth forum in Tophane. But overall Sarigul was so impressed with the trip that his team had a "lessons learned" meeting following the trip and organized an advance team to "start the winds of Sarigul" blowing before he arrives in campaign locations. Sarigul told us he plans to travel to Washington within the next few months and intends to visit the President at the White House.

ISTANBUL 00000151 002 OF 003

"I Funded Eroglu's Entire Election Campaign"

¶6. (C) Sarigul told us he personally financed Dervis Eroglu's entire campaign in the April 19 "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)" election. (Note: After Eroglu's Nationalist Unity Party (UBP) won a convincing victory, opposition leader Serder Denktas accused the Sisli mayor of funneling financial backing to the UBP campaign (Ref B). UBP denied receiving financial support from Sarigul but acknowledged his help in advertising and campaign consulting. End note.) Sarigul said Erdogan needs to invite Eroglu to Turkey very soon, and that he does not support a settlement to create a bi-communal federation, favoring instead a two-state solution. (Note: Erdogan loathes Eroglu and has not even made a congratulatory call; hence, it is unlikely that Erdogan would invite Eroglu to Turkey. End note.)

On Armenia, PKK and Iraq

¶7. (SBU) Sarigul supports opening the border with Armenia, with the precondition that the Azerbaijan foreign minister is also involved in this process. He sees the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) as one of the greatest threats to Turkey. According to Sarigul, this is a problem that can only be solved between Prime Minister Erdogan and the U.S. Defense Department. He discounts any influence that Iraqi government or the Kurdish Regional Government could wield in this issue.

The AKP is Not Serious about EU Membership

¶8. (SBU) Sarigul again stated his support for Turkey's membership to the EU (ref A), and criticized the lack of progress under the current government. He thinks AKP's focus on the headscarf after their election victory in 2007 cost it the opportunity to push through needed EU-mandated reforms. Sarigul claimed AKP has done very little to advance EU

membership, despite being in power since 2002. Erdogan is now focused on winning elections, at the expense of pushing through unpopular reforms. Erdogan's outburst at Davos was for domestic consumption, according to Sarigul, hurting Turkey's foreign policy for short-term political gain. As Prime Minister, Sarigul claimed he would make the hard choices needed to help Turkey's national interest. (Comment: Sarigul's support for a two-state solution in Cyprus and his backing of the nationalist UBP calls to question his own commitment to make the hard choices necessary for EU accession. End comment.)

¶9. (C) Comment: Sarigul faces long odds in his pursuit to become Prime Minister, but his current strategy might be his best chance to attain his goal. Creating a new party is a bold and a necessary step to bypass the nearly impossible process of unseating a party chair. (Sarigul failed in his attempt to replace Deniz Baykal as leader of the CHP, a move that got him kicked out of the party.) Also, despite the surprise exit of Zeki Sezer, Sarigul probably has correctly calculated he does not have the political allies to take control of DSP. An AKP insider and political strategist told us that one should "never underestimate Sarigul. He understands politics very well." Sarigul does have sufficient name recognition and funding to create a viable party, and his ambitious plan to hold 314 national rallies could stimulate interest in this self-appointed advocate of change. Sarigul's campaign organization appears to have contributed to UBP's victory in the "TRNC" and his calls for a two-state solution could win over nationalists who are upset with Erdogan's continuing support for a settlement in Cyprus. Sarigul, however, has the handicap of being a left-wing politician in a country with a largely center-right population. The qualities that brought him a strong win in the urban, more secular district of Sisli might be obstacles in the heartland of Anatolia. Finally, despite his strong focus on foreign policy issues, it will likely be domestic economic issues that determine how Turks will vote. End Comment.

ISTANBUL 00000151 003 OF 003

Wiener